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February 25, 2008

The Honorable Robert M. Gates
Secretary
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are writing to ask that you take several steps on behalf of wounded members of the National Guard, the Reserves, and their families.

The National Guard provides up to 50% of the deployed operational military force for the United States, but they face distinct hurdles that members of the active duty military do not. Members of the National Guard do not return home to bases filled with comrades, easily accessible services, records, and avenues of medical treatment. They go back to civilian life, where responsibilities of employment and family are immediate, and where assistance with military and veterans medical issues may seem remote.

We appreciate that the Defense Department has begun to recognize the specific challenges faced by members of military returning home with severe mental and physical injuries. But we have concerns that the Department's new policies do not adequately address the unique needs of National Guard members and their families or appropriately resource essential support services. The increase of personnel dedicated to wounded service members at medical treatment facilities and active duty bases is commendable, but there remains a tremendous need for personnel to assist National Guard members where they live and report, in their states, and at their state headquarters. Unfortunately, the Department's current outreach to the Guard community is not deep, and coordination with the National Guard Bureau is inadequate.

For these reasons, we ask that you take several specific steps:

First, we ask that you support and fund a comprehensive, standardized psychological health care program for members of the National Guard. The urgency of this request is underscored by a recent study by the Department of Veterans Affairs finding that Guard and

Reserve members accounted for 53% of veteran suicides from 2001 to 2005.¹ We understand that the National Guard Bureau has proposed to Dr. David Chu, Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, a program to place a Director of Psychological Health at each of the 54 joint state Guard headquarters to act as focal points for coordinating and addressing the mental health care needs of the National Guard. Given the severity of this problem, we ask that you support and fund this program and these mental health specialists without further delay.

Second, we ask that you support dedicated funding to provide Transitional Assistance Advisors (TAA) in every state. The purpose of the TAA program is to provide a person in each state or territory to assist service members in accessing treatment, benefits, assistance with obtaining TRICARE entitlements, and access to community and state resources. Since its inception in 2005, the TAA program has been an essential service to the Guard community. Unlike the new personnel positions that are being provided to active duty bases and medical treatment facilities, the Department, the Army, and the Air Force do not include this program in their annual budgets, forcing the National Guard to fund the program in a piecemeal fashion. We believe this program should have dedicated Defense Department funding.

Third, we urge you to immediately execute provisions of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2008 to implement the *Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Program*. Congress created this program to establish a national network of transition support workers to help members of all components who do not live near military installations successfully move to civilian status. This national reintegration effort is intended to focus specifically on providing members of the Reserve Components with counseling on family, employment, education, and other transition issues. For these reasons, Congress designated your office as executive agent for securing funding for this program, and it was Congress' intent to have the National Guard Bureau act as the day-to-day manager of the national program. On behalf of the thousands of Guard and Reserve members who will be served by this program, we ask that you implement it immediately.

Finally, we ask that you support dedicated funding for the proper inclusion of human resources staff at National Guard state headquarters in all departmental initiatives. Patient tracking and the flow of personnel and medical information is vital to wounded Guard members and their families. Stove-piped, paper-bound, and non-standardized systems cause information to cascade down to state Guard headquarters in haphazard and detrimental ways that create immense difficulties for Guard members and their families. Lack of IT connectivity will continue to cause errors that affect the timeliness of benefits and treatment. Lack of dedicated funding for standardized training of National Guard human resources staff in new medical administrative procedures and programs at Guard state headquarters will continue to undermine the effectiveness of well-intentioned Departmental efforts.

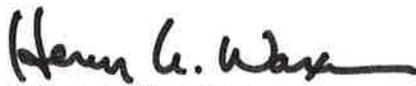
¹ See, e.g., *Suicide by Guard, Reserve Troops Studied*, Associated Press (Feb. 12, 2008).

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We believe the nation has made a solemn commitment to all military service members, including those citizen-soldiers in the National Guard who have served our country with honor and at great sacrifice. For this reason, we hope that you will support our efforts to make good on that promise. We look forward to hearing from you.

If you or your staff have any questions, please contact David Rapallo with the Majority office at (202) 225-5420 or Grace Washbourne with the Minority office at (202) 225-5074.

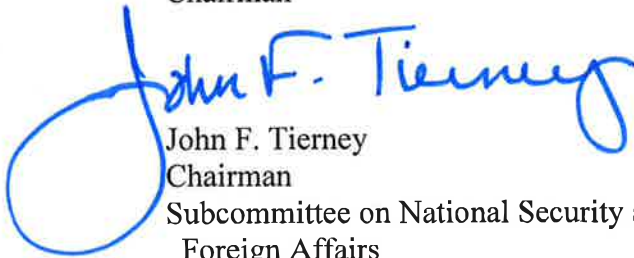
Sincerely,



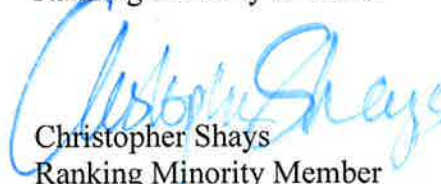
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Member of Congress

cc: General H Steven Blum
Chief, National Guard Bureau